

Beware of ‘New Bright Shiny Objects’

Are you truly nurturing thriving or just fighting symptoms?

“When they first share the news with you about their pregnancy – you can use the following scripts / pointers to congratulate them. Also wish them all the very best and ask them how you can support them” -

A good friend of mine, who is a HR Head of a large Pharma company was sharing this with me – it was part of a training program his team was designing to ‘sensitise’ Managers and equip them to support their woman team members proceeding on maternity break, in the best possible way.

When I heard this, I said to him that if you have Managers who need to be instructed and trained to congratulate their team members in this situation - you have a much bigger problem to deal with – and a training program like this is DEFINITELY NOT going to fix that problem.

This friend and I have been having this intense debate for more than 3-4 years – his organization has been facing many people issues – lower engagement, higher attrition of valuable talent, and poor succession pipeline. He firmly believes that one of the biggest levers to set this situation right is developing ‘right’ people leadership capabilities in his line leaders. He has been trying hard to identify a trainer / technology tool/ a training program that can do this trick. I completely agree with him on the criticality of having Managers with the right leadership capabilities. Where he and I have a strong disagreement on is on how to go about achieving this. For easy reference, I am capturing the two different positions in the table below:

<p>My friend believes that this problem will be solved, if he identifies the ‘right’ skills his leaders need (e.g. listening, giving feedback, coaching) and finds an effective training program / technology tool that can help these leaders build the skills.</p>	<p>I believe that ‘skill building’ can potentially be useful IF AND ONLY IF certain foundational conditions are satisfied. First the work needs to be done on these foundational conditions or else all the efforts in skill building will show very limited impact</p>
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My friend and I have been having a very intense debate on this issue – and this article is my attempt to capture the many things that I have learnt from this debate. I think at the core of this debate are two very different orientations – I call these orientations as NBSO (New Bright Shiny Object) v/s FOSB (Foundational , Organic, Systemic Being)

The ‘NBSO’ orientation

I forget where I first heard this phrase (NBSO) – but I think it very aptly describes one recurrent pattern that we see all around us these days. NBSO stands for ‘**NEW BRIGHT SHINY OBJECTS**’. NBSO pattern is about our tendency to chase almost all new, fancy looking, quick-win solutions while **IGNORING** foundational elements of a system (While in this article I am focusing on the world of work and leadership – NBSOs can be found in all spheres of life – from parenting, health , politics to investing ,strategy , economics .. the list can go on).

The NBSO approach is understood better, when we compare it with its philosophical opposite – **‘FOUNDATIONAL ORGANIC SYSTEMIC BEING’ (FOSB)** which entails long term, organic and system-wide work on core , foundational elements – which is often unglamorous and slow – but usually builds robust, healthy and self-sustaining entities – where the core principles become an integral part of the system’s natural essence and hence the label ‘being’.

The following table gives some typical examples of NBSO and FOSB approaches in specific context of people leadership capabilities.

CHASING ‘New Bright Shiny Objects’	BUILDING ‘Foundational Organic Systemic Being’
‘Touch points’ process for ‘check in’ with Managers	Day to day, natural , meaningful conversations with Manager that takes the work forward and helps the employee grow
‘Annual Team building off-sites’ with external trainers (using range of novel techniques – from theatre to adventure sports to arts)	Regular ‘All Hands’ meetings where work, individual and team performance and culture is discussed in a meaningful , open and insightful way
Elaborate, tech enabled , points based Recognition framework and systems , fancy and glamorous gift hampers	Authentic, personal acknowledgement of work and values that truly matter, in a manner and with people that matters to the recipient.
Sensitivity and diversity training sessions focused on special segments (e.g. Gender , LGBT , PWD etc)	Leaders who strive EVERYDAY to create work cultures (meetings, discussions, workplaces) that are truly non-hierarchical , psychologically safe and transparent

In fact many tools, ideas and concepts (read ‘flavour of the month’ fads) that have been over the years marketed as ‘THE’ single and most effective solution for all leadership problems – are all classic examples of the NBSO problem. (Few examples that come to mind – EQ, Coaching ,continuous feedback, continuous listening and so on)

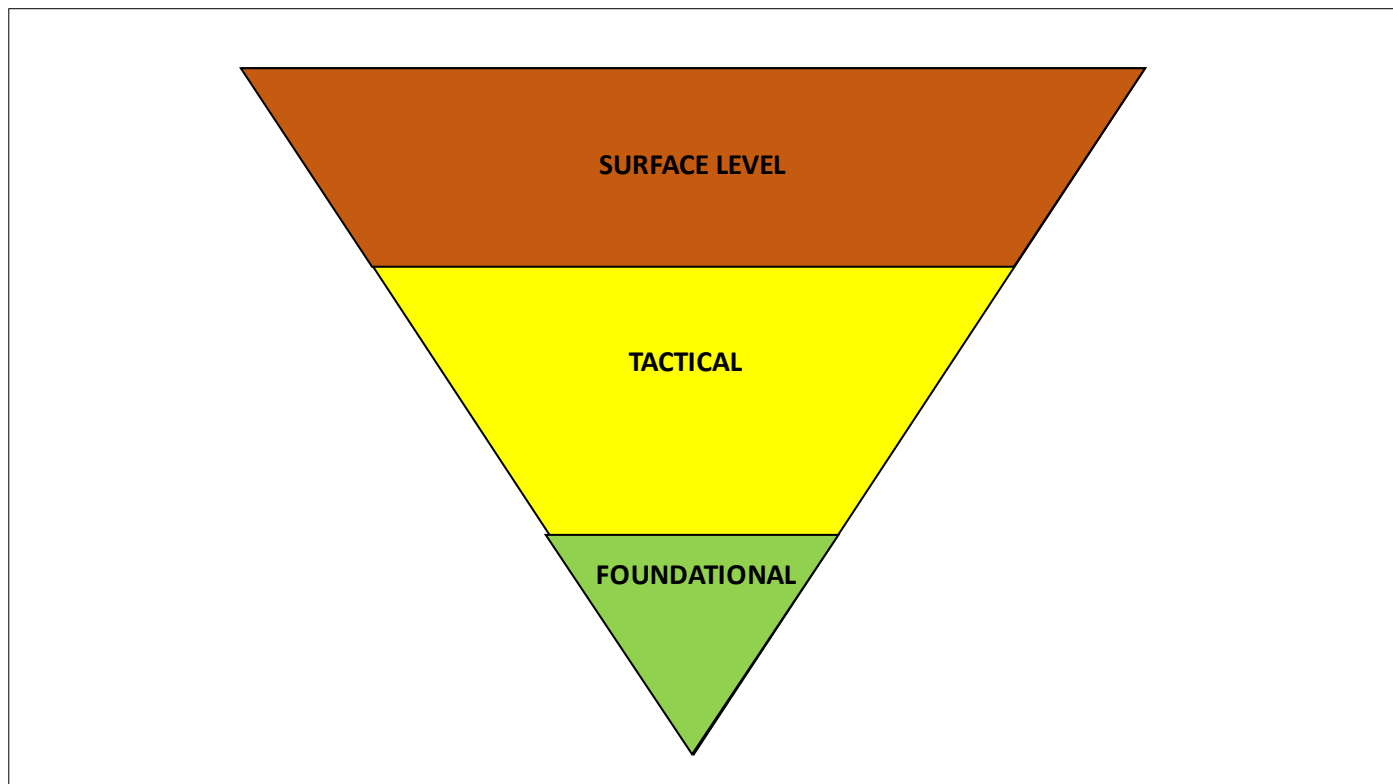
I must clarify here that I am not at all implying that all things mentioned above not useful – the point I am trying to make is, these things can be helpful ONLY WHEN the Foundational elements are at a satisfactory level. By themselves, these NBSO activities cannot bring lasting impact

The core nature of differences that are often associated with these approaches can be summarized as below

CHASING ‘New Bright Shiny Objects’	BUILDING ‘Foundational Organic Systemic Being’
Surface level	Deep
New, trendy, glamorous	First principles, unglamorous, boring
Belief that some consultant , technique , technology , ‘APP’, tool will do the trick to get the work done	Belief that no sustainable change can be achieved if you don’t do the work yourself – all external support can only facilitate
Belief that solution can be ‘bought’, off the shelf	Solution must be built and implemented by yourself for your context
‘Event’ driven – gimmicky (Hence great for social media photo opportunities)	‘Process’ driven – way of life (Not many photo opportunities)
Fighting Symptoms	Nurturing Thriving
Reactive, problem solving	Creative, health generating

Looking at Leadership Development: NBSO V/s FOSB lens

As it can be seen in the previous section of the article, the FOSB approach is mainly about having clarity on core, foundational drivers of a phenomenon and about providing adequate, proactive attention to these drivers in order to build an inherently healthy and self-sustaining system.



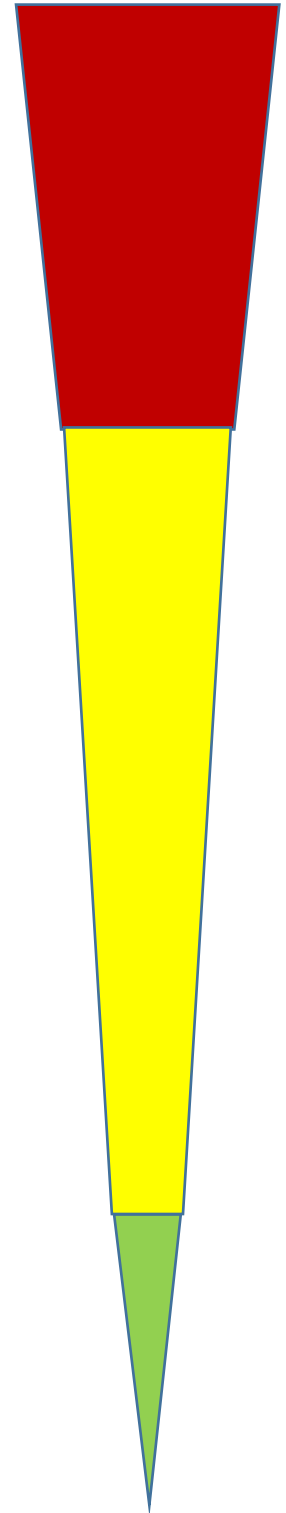
Few important points

- If Foundational elements have a problem, they will continue to have a negative impact on all the work done at Tactical as well as Surface level
- If Foundational elements have a problem, but the solution is only dealing with Surface level elements – the solution is unlikely to create long lasting impact.
- Strength and health of the foundation will be the ULTIMATE limiting and determining factor for how tall and strong the system can become
- Strong and healthy foundational elements are likely to eliminate the occurrence of many Surface level problems – and hence avoiding a lot of wastage and helping the system to focus its energy on it's core mission

Contrasting Leadership Development: NBSO V/s FOSB Approach

(For the table below, I have leveraged the three tiered framework (Individual, Social and Structural) presented in the book 'Change Anything' (Authors Joseph Grenny and others))

	NBSO	FOSB
Interventions (Training programs , APPS, consultants)	Wide array of topical interventions for skill building – from coaching, diversity , listening , feedback , conversations , values – without necessarily having a coherent framework or organizational mechanisms to institutionalize these frameworks – different Managers get covered in different principles and different skills (Effects of which don't really add up at an organization level)	Top leaders clearly articulate core leadership principles and through role modelling and deep engagement – help the entire organization understand these principles and create a shared language. Organization wide interventions rolled out to embed the core principles
Structural Elements (Positive and negative consequences)	The Positive as well as Negative consequences are not anchored in consistent principles – but driven by idiosyncrasies of top leaders – hence very poor behaviours can go unpunished for long and great leadership can also go totally unnoticed and unrecognized	Organization is seen to have its ears to the ground – it picks up early signals (Positive and negative) with rigor and consistency – Clear feedback about deviations is provided in a timely manner – clear positive and negative impact of leadership principles is seen in PM Ratings, Promotions , Talent ratings as well as Recognition
Social Elements (Quality of supervision and HR role)	Line Leaders tolerate (or even encourage) substandard leaders for personal convenience or political gains – there is a general tendency NOT to rock the boat HRBPs think that their role is to 'serve' the Business Leaders – HR Leaders lack the capacity to act as organization's conscience keeper	Line Leaders are held accountable as 'custodians of talent ecosystem' and they take continuous efforts to enhance the quality of talent HRBPs act as the facilitators for Line Leaders who play the custodian role well. But for line leaders who fail to play the custodian role – HRBPs play the 'Protect the Organization' role by highlighting the failure and by holding line leaders accountable
Individual Elements (Quality of individual leaders)	Huge variation in quality of leaders Leaders lacking Character or Competence (for Level at which they operate) or both are tolerated	Almost non-negotiable standards followed for Leadership Character AND Competence (for the work-level) – clear and strong feedback given to those who have gaps and swift separation actions taken if improvements not shown in time bound manner



Conclusion

I must reiterate – that I am not suggesting these tools and technologies offer no value – the only purpose of this article is to remind all of us that focusing attention on foundational elements is non negotiable if you want to build a self-sustaining, thriving organisation. That is THE REAL WORK.

The trendy tools and APPS can definitely add a lot of value in an organization where foundational elements are already in place and are constantly being worked upon , but wishing that the trendy tools will make the foundational problems go away, me be just wishful thinking.

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NOTE: The views expressed in this article are personal and the article is meant to capture some of my reflections and generate a discussion with professionals who think about and work in this space.

I will be very keen to have your thoughts and feedback – you can share them at shaileshdesh@gmail.com